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SUBJECT: In the Hoa Hao Heartland

Ref: 02 Ho Chi Minh City 1140

1. (SBU) Summary: The south's An Giang province includes members of almost all of Vietnam's religious communities, but is the homeland of the indigenous Hoa Hao Buddhist sect which, according to GVN figures, comprises almost 40% of the province's two million residents. The GVN-recognized Hoa Hao Administrative Committee (HHAC) appears to be unusually deeply involved with community development efforts normally undertaken by the government. The four-year old HHAC also boasts an extensive program to train and develop its leaders, and denies that any current "monks" are mainstream Hoa Hao believers. Hoa Hao Founder Huynh Phu So's ancestral home -- a Hoa Hao pilgrimage site -- is still occupied and run by his family, which tries to sidestep controversies surrounding the HHAC and the various non-GVN recognized Hoa Hao groups. Given the HHAC's activities, terminology, and approach, it is not difficult to see why its detractors claim it is too close to the CPV and GVN. End Summary.

The Hoa Hao

2. (U) Nguyen Huy Diem, Secretary of the Hoa Hao Administrative Committee, and Nguyen Van Luong, head of the HHAC's Administration and Personnel Division, along with several other Hoa Hao and An Giang provincial officials, met DCM, poloff, and ConGen pol/econoff at the Administrative Committee's headquarters near the Hoa Hao Founder's temple on May 20. According to Diem, Hoa Hao believers practiced their faith in their homes after 1975. The Hoa Hao's "old administration" was not in line with the Founder's teachings and prophecy, Diem claimed. By 1999, however, "living conditions" had improved sufficiently from the time of "liberation" that followers proposed establishment of an administrative committee. With approval (unclear from Diem's remarks whether tacit or formal) from GVN authorities, Hoa Hao followers then organized a congress to set up an administrative structure, elect an administrative committee, and "regularize" the faith. Organizers, including Diem, invited over 400 individuals to attend the congress; 210 representatives from 9 provinces came.

3. (U) The congress established regulations and a plan for the organization based on "the teachings and prophecy of the Founder." The followers also vowed to improve and develop their virtues and to develop their religion, Diem added.

4. (U) A new Administrative Committee of eleven members was divided into four divisions. One is responsible for organization and personnel and supervises local-level Hoa Hao committees that now exist in over 230 communes and wards with large Hoa Hao populations in nine provinces, according to Diem. Each local committee has one leader and five assistants. Diem said that the HHAC is still conducting a census to determine the true number of believers, but estimated there were about two million nation-wide. The organization and personnel division also oversees celebration of two major annual holidays, "Founding Day" and the Founder's birthday. Diem claimed that over 300,000 visitors had attended one of these celebrations in 2002.

5. (U) Another division handles "propaganda and teaching." It has published -- with GVN permission -- 100,000 copies of a book outlining the Founder's teachings and prophecies as well as 250,000 copies of the portrait of the Founder. It has also distributed various cassette tapes and a regular newsletter. The division organizes 24 "basic professional teaching" classes, which about 6,000 followers have attended for fifteen-day sessions. The division also developed a new "training of trainers" class for 100 participants that will last eighteen months. These trainers will then go out and provide classes to others. Young people are quite interested in learning about the Founder's teachings, Diem claimed.

6. (U) The charitable and social assistance division builds bridges, road, and houses; conducts flood relief; offers food to hospital patients; helps those needing eye surgery; provides free coffins; disseminates traditional herbal medicines; and conducts vocational training classes.

Believers contribute funds and labor for these projects. Diem estimated the number of bridges built by the Hoa Hao at 143, along with over 100 kilometers of roads. (He clarified that they must consult with local authorities about the projects.) While people "know" these are Hoa Hao projects, the HHAC invites local authorities to the opening ceremonies. Since charity and good works is one of the pillars of the Hoa Hao faith, followers are "eager" to donate their labor and money to these community projects, he added. There is no overseas assistance for these activities, even from U.S.-based Hoa Hao. Diem noted that the Hoa Hao cooperate with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, especially for eye surgeries, as well as with other religions "as necessary."

17. (U) An "inspection and control" division is responsible for maintaining the "purity" of the religion and for ensuring that teaching is accurate. It is also charged with stopping followers from "abusing and distorting" the religion and from undertaking activities that defame the Hoa Hao faith. If necessary, it takes steps to "encourage" followers to avoid those who "abuse and distort" the religion.

18. (U) DCM asked Diem about Hoa Hao followers and monks such as Nam Liem (reftel) who do not accept the HHAC's authority. Diem claimed that the number of Hoa Hao outside his organization was limited. He also pointed out that, according to the Founder's prophecy, the religion consists only of the Founder and followers; there are not supposed to be any spiritual leaders or monks. He contrasted the HHAC -- a body elected by Hoa Hao followers -- with "self-declared" leaders or monks whom the HHAC does not recognize. These individuals oppose the HHAC because it does not recognize them, Diem declared. Regarding the monk Nam Liem, Diem emphasized that he is not a Hoa Hao, but an independent monk outside the Hoa Hao Buddhist sect, with no followers. Diem denounced Nam Liem for keeping a Buddha statue in his house, in contrast to the normal Hoa Hao practice of representing Buddha with a brown or red cloth. The HHAC had sent a delegation to meet with Nam Liem, but the monk refused to speak to them. Diem compared this behavior to that of Huynh Van Long, who had been a monk but now belongs to a commune-level HHAC committee. The HHAC had invited many such people to join their organization and a "high percentage" had accepted, he claimed. He reiterated that the only person with a spiritual role in the Hoa Hao religion was the Founder himself. The HHAC was thus not a spiritual, but an administrative organization.

19. (U) Diem declined to answer a question about how many of An Giang's provincial leaders are Hoa Hao. He noted, however, that about 400 Hoa Hao in An Giang are CPV members.

The Founder's House

10. (U) The Founder's ancestral home is a focal point of the Hoa Hao religion. DCM and party visited on May 20 and spoke with Bui Thi Be and Bui Van Duong, the niece and nephew of the Founder. They received DCM cordially, but cautiously. Ms. Be still lives in the ancestral home with some other family members. The public portion of the home is a somewhat temple-like pavilion fronted by a garden containing topiary and colored lights. Numerous portraits of the Founder and his relatives adorn the walls. Ms. Be and Duong said that their role was to maintain the house and facilitate worship there. They do not teach other followers or claim to know much about the affairs of the HHAC.

11. (U) The house attracts tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of pilgrims every year, they claimed. Ms. Be said that the three most important times are the founding day of Hoa Haoism and the anniversaries of the Founder's birth and death. Smaller commemorations occur on his parents' death anniversaries. The first celebration of founding day following GVN recognition of Hoa Haoism was the biggest, she said. The holidays had been celebrated but on a smaller scale, prior to 1999. She commented that the size of celebrations had diminished somewhat since the first officially sanctioned celebrations in 1999, in part because there are now some 250 local associations that also commemorate those holidays in their own locations. Since most followers are farmers, the number of pilgrims is also influenced by the success of the harvest.

12. (U) In response to a question about relations with overseas Hoa Hao associations, Ms. Be claimed that local Hoa Hao maintain "normal" relations with family members overseas, but did not comment on relations with overseas Hoa Hao organizations. She clarified that it is her family that is responsible for maintaining the Founder's home, not the HHAC.

13. (SBU) Comment: The HHAC's structure and its

terminology are more reminiscent of a GVN agency or a CPV-controlled mass organization than most religious bodies. The activities of the HHAC's social affairs division are particularly startling in their scope and appear to be far beyond what other religions are allowed by the GVN to undertake. If the HHAC represents Hoa Hao followers who have made their peace with the GVN and have decided to play by its rules, as many critics claim, they have done so in a definitive way that leaves them surprising freedom of action even in non-religious fields.

BURGHARDT